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ABSTRACT

Some language features are described that could account for feelings of people from different cultures not being on the same "wave length" when they communicate with each other in business negotiations. Candlin's explanatory approach involving a "top-down, bottom-up" methodology is used. It views language as being indeterminate and allows language to be studied in relation to the users of language. Data are reported based on analysis of a videotape of two businessmen from Singapore and Great Britain. Three features of language occurring in the negotiation are discussed: "propose" speech acts, interactional structure, and distribution of talk. It is suggested that their different perceptions of the negotiations and attitudes toward each other lie in the way they acknowledge each other's "face," and the way they realize "pragmatic ambivalence." Contains 16 references. (LB)

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Explaining Diffrent Discourse Strategies in Cross-cultural Business Negotiations

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Explaining Different Discourse Strategies in Cross-cultural Business Negotiations

When people from different cultures communicate with each other, there is often the feeling that they are not on the same 'wave-length'. This paper attempts to uncover a few features of language that could account for this perception in the context of business negotiations. In analysing the data, I have adopted Candlin's explanatory approach which involves a 'top-down bottom-up' methodology. It is 'top-down' in that it involves reference to 'higher-order predicates' such as the participants' goals, their beliefs and views concerning their interlocutors and the interaction, all set in a socio-cultural context. And it is 'bottom-up' in focusing on features of language such as the "pragmatic, discoursal, lexico-syntactic and phonological" (Candlin 1987, pp 30-31).

The approach is an attractive one because it views language as being indeterminate, varying according to the cultural and speech context, purpose and event, and also because it recognises that communication is a "skilled accomplishment of participants in the service of some social goal" (Candlin 1987, p 24). Such an approach focuses the study of discourse not only on language but also on the **users** of the language and the way in which they use language to accomplish their goals. The use of language cannot be examined in isolation but in the context of a speech event that occurs in a socio-cultural setting. In other words, the knowledge an individual brings to a speech event, be it linguistic or otherwise, needs to be considered as having some influence, direct or indirect, on the way he communicates.

Before looking at the data in greater detail, I would like to briefly

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describe some background to the data I use. The data is based on a video-recording of two businessmen, a Singaporean and a Briton, role-playing a standard sales negotiation game used by Graham (1980) which I have modified. One of the roles is that of a buyer representing a chain of supermarkets; the other is that of a seller representing a food supplier. They negotiate over the prices and purchasing conditions of three products. After the negotiation, the subjects were asked to fill in a questionnaire asking about their attitudes to the negotiation, the person they negotiated with and the effectiveness of communication. The Singaporean subject is the Far East editor for an international publishing company dealing with trading information while the Briton is a trader by profession. The Singaporean was educated in English and rates himself as a fluent speaker of English. The Singaporean (SES) in the negotiation is the buyer and the Briton (BES) the seller.

A) Aspects of language use

In this section, I focus on the description of three features of language that occurred in the negotiation:

1) 'Propose' speech acts
2) interactional structure
3) distribution of talk.

1) Realizations of 'Propose' Speech Acts

To isolate the 'Propose' speech acts, I used Edmondson's model (1981) for analysing spoken discourse. Edmondson characterises Proposes as occurring when the speaker (S) wishes the hearer (H) to believe S is in favour of an act which is in both their interests and is to be performed jointly by both of them. This act identifies much of the proposals that negotiators make

in the process of coming to an agreement. When these acts were isolated in the data, it became clear that the SES and the BES used quite different linguistic realizations.

The SES tends to use 'bald-on-record' structures, which are acts that are done "in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" (Brown and Levinson 1987, p69). Examples that the SES uses are:

- *if we were to take [...] we would like to have [...]*
- *suppose we were to take [...] we would like [...]*
- *suppose we were to take [...] you review [...] and we guarantee [...]*
- *why not we stop [...] and you go back and do your homework*

The BES on the other hand is more circumspect in his proposals and uses structures such as:

- *if you wanted we could create [...] we would take on [...] if you could give [...]*
- *if you wanted [...] we could extend [...] but it would really depend on [...]*
- *if we had [...] we can most probably give you [...]*
- *we'd only be able to supply [...] if we extended [...]*
- *we might be able to push [...] but we would prefer to stick [...]*

2) Interactional Structure

Edmondson's speech act model is also useful in examining the structure of interaction. His basic framework (1981) comprises, starting at the lowest level of analysis, Interactional Acts which are realised in Illocutionary

Acts. Interactional Acts combine to form Interactional Moves, the point at which turn-taking occurs. Interactional Moves are sequenced to form Exchanges which combine to form Phases. A sequenced Phase structure of Ave (ie. Greet), Business and Vale (ie. Leavetake) result in an Encounter. Although Edmondson hardly deals with interactional structure above the level of the exchange, he suggests that it is possible that another level, the Transaction, is possible between the ranks of Exchange and Phase as it is "intuitively clear that the Business Phase of a conversation may contain more than one Business Exchange" (p 190).

The need for a Transaction rank is clear in business negotiation data as different 'topics' are dealt with as the negotiation proceeds. To put my following comments in context, the table below provides a summary of the transactions that occur during the negotiation.

Transaction	Turn	Business
1	1-4	Greeting
2	5-15	Establishing of common ground
3	16-67	Discussing of product ranges
4	68-87	Discussing the marketing approach
5	88-156	Proposing of initial prices
6	157-355	Bargaining, repackaging of proposals
7	356-371	Leavetaking

The point I wish to illustrate concerns two of the SES's responses that occur in Transaction 6 where he responds in an unusual way to the BES. The first occurs soon after the BES introduces the topic of credit terms as part of his first proposal, which includes specific prices. The BES 'signals' in turn 161 that he is willing to improve the credit terms he is offering but that "*it would really depend on what sort of prices we came to*

an agreement on". The illocutionary force of his statement carries not only his willingness to move, but also indicates his desire for the SES to give him some feedback on the prices he has proposed. But the SES responds, in turn 162, with:

> *yup that's true .. er we have done our survey and that erm . we yeah you're right . we intend to push the tomato sauce erm . right to the public . that is why we would put up the cost as fifty percent because there's going to be a lot of advertising outlay .*

Interactionally, this move can be accounted for using Edmondson's model. In terms of the interactional move, the closest category that might apply is the 'Reject', which is defined as occurring when there is no uptake of the previous move, and as rejecting the previous move as not being conversationally licensed. However, the way in which the SES 'Rejects' tha BES's move may be considered unusual. He does so by introducing the topic of tomato sauce that was last discussed in Transaction 5 at turn 129.

The second of the SES's responses I wish to highlight is very similar and occurs soon after the first example. The context for the response is as follows: the SES asks for better credit terms and the BES partially concedes, indicating again that it would depend on the prices. The SES responds with a back-channel cue "right", so the BES re-proffers his proposal, over several turns, with specific prices and credit terms. There is a 4 second silence and the SES uptakes in turn 186 with:

> *the reason we're pushing tomato sauce is that erm . we are hearing that there are certain brands coming especially from Cold Storage and they're pushing the brands . new brands .*

Again, the SES's unusual realisation of his Reject act occurs when the BES is expecting some feedback on his proposals. Also, his realisation is similar to the previous example in that he refers again to the same topic of tomato sauce.

3) Distribution of Talk

One of the most obvious features in the data, in terms of the distribution of talk, is the large number of back-channel devices the SES uses. Although there are problems with the definition of these devices, I have followed the types listed by LoCastro (1987): 'm-hm', 'yeah', 'right' etc. In this negotiation the SES uses 6.6 times as many BCDs as the BES, the usage being 132 BCDs and 20 BCDs respectively. As buyer, it is expected that the SES listens and uses BCDs more, but these figures are significantly higher than those of another negotiation between the same BES seller and a BES buyer. (In that negotiation, the buyer used BCDs 71 times compared to the seller's 34 times.) The consequence of the SES's speech behaviour in the SES/BES negotiation was that the BES held the floor most of the time. This is borne out by the totalled times of each person's turns: in all, the SES spoke for 8 minutes 38 seconds while the BES spoke for 16 minutes 48 seconds.

In addition to this, there are a relatively large number of silences at transition relevance places (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978) that seem to co-occur with the use of BCDs by the SES. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson distinguish three types of silence: pauses, which are intra-turn silences; gaps, which are silences at transition-relevance places, and are to be minimised; and lapses, which are extended silences. A summary of the silences and their contexts is presented below. I have not included

silences that occur when the subjects were obviously considering what had previously been said as evidenced in the video-recording by a loss of eye-contact, the studying of papers and the writing of notes. Neither have I included gaps, which I have taken as silences of 2 seconds and less.

	Pre-context		Length of Silence	Post-context
S1	BES informs	-	4.56 sec.	BES uptakes
S2*	BES informs	SES uses BCD	5.06 sec.	BES uptakes
S3*	BES informs	SES uses BCD	3.93 sec.	BES uptakes
S4	BES informs	SES uses BCD	3.10 sec.	SES uptakes
S5*	BES informs	-	4.26 sec.	SES uptakes
S6	BES informs	SES uses BCD	3.56 sec.	SES uptakes
S7*	BES informs	SES uses BCD	2.56 sec.	BES uptakes
S8*	BES informs	SES uses BCD	5.53 sec.	BES uptakes
S9	BES informs	SES uses BCD	3.78 sec.	SES uptakes
S10*	BES informs	SES uses BCD	5.06 sec.	BES uptakes
S11*	SES asks BES question	BES responds	3.47 sec.	SES uptakes

Of the silences listed above, the asterisked silences are lapses of more than 2 seconds. Of the 7 lapses, five (S2, S3, S7, S8, S10) were resolved by the BES, and in all five instances, the silences were initiated by the use of BCDs by the SES.

Before the three features of language described above are discussed, it will be useful to get an idea of how the subjects felt about the negotiation and each other. Generally speaking, the SES was fairly satisfied with the negotiation and the agreement that was reached. He felt very comfortable with the BES and indicated that he found him to be an

interesting person. He felt that the BES was friendly and polite, though guarded towards him, while he perceived himself as being friendly, polite, cooperative, open, unaggressive and sincere towards the BES. As far as the effectiveness of communication was concerned, the SES felt that it was fairly good, that there was no miscommunication, and that they were communicating on the same wave-length most of the time. The BES, on the other hand, was generally dissatisfied with the negotiation and the agreement. He felt uncomfortable with the SES and did not find him an interesting person. He felt that the SES was guarded, aggressive and insincere and that his bargaining strategies were exploitative, deceptive, ineffective and biased. At the same time he perceived himself as being friendly and polite, but guarded and aggressive. In addition, he felt that there was some miscommunication and that they were not always communicating on the same wave-length.

B) Explaining the differences

It is clear then that the SES and BES had quite different perceptions of the negotiation and attitudes towards each other. I would like to suggest that their differences lie in two areas: the way they acknowledge each other's 'face' and the way they realise 'pragmatic ambivalence'. Thomas (1985) defines pragmatic ambivalence as occurring "when the speaker does not make clear precisely which of a series of related illocutionary acts is intended" and she also points out that it is a fairly prevalent feature of language. She suggests that it is used, not so much to be polite, but because it is expedient to do so when communicative goals conflict. This is especially true in sales negotiations where conflicting goals are inherent: sellers want to sell their goods at the highest prices possible; buyers want them at the lowest possible. Pragmatic ambivalence is at a

premium in negotiations where a lot of 'signalling' is done. Kennedy, Benson and McMillan (1987) define signals as "qualifications placed on a statement of a position. Instead of saying 'We will never agree to what you are proposing' the words 'In its present form' might be added". The gloss is: "Amend your position and you might create room for me to amend mine". How this ambivalence is achieved and what one is ambivalent about, however, might differ from culture to culture.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face-threatening acts (FTA) is also relevant in providing an insight into the data. According to Brown and Levinson, the degree of tentativeness and care that S has to use to minimise an FTA depends on three sociological variables: social distance, relative power and absolute ranking of impositions. This last variable is of special relevance in making proposals. The impositions in negotiations largely concern the list of 'wants' and 'must-haves' that negotiators consciously or subconsciously decide on before and modify during dialogue with the other party. In collaborative negotiations, it is possible, through signalling, for the negotiators to get an idea of how much of an imposition they are making in asking/requesting for a particular point. This helps them phrase their proposals at an appropriately redressive level. The variable of power too comes into play; power in terms of role and status. In this instance, the negotiators are equal vis-a-vis their status in their respective company's and the companies they represent. Psychologically though, the buyer has a slight edge over the seller and it may be possible for the former to take advantage of this fact.

Looking at the linguistic realizations of the proposal speech acts, it can be seen that the SES formulates his proposals by asking specifically for

what he wants, whereas the BES hedges in expressing his wants. This could account for the BES's negative perception to the SES (as being aggressive, for example) since the BES might have felt that his face was being threatened by the SES's use of bald-on-record acts in making his proposals. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that bald-on-record acts are legitimate only when the act needs to be performed efficiently, or when the threat to H's face is "*very* small, as in offers, requests, suggestions that are clearly in H's interest ..." (p 69), or where S has vastly more power than H. Seen in this light, the SES might appear as being unnecessarily "direct, clear, unambiguous and concise" (p 69) and might be perceived as threatening the BES's face by implying that he has more power than the BES. However this alone cannot fully explain the potentially negative impact of the SES's bald-on-record proposals as it is also quite possible to use "I would like ..." in English without sounding demanding, especially with a politeness tag. In addition to having threatened the BES's face in terms of power, it is possible that the SES may have misjudged the degree of imposition of the goods he asks for since there is little exploratory work on his part to find out what the BES considers to be negotiable. At the same time he also apparently fails to pick up the BES's signals (possibly due to their ambivalent realisations) as to what the BES considers to be important.

The difference in the speech act realisations may arise because as buyer, the SES is in a relatively stronger position. However, I do not believe this to be a plausible reason as the data from another negotiation between BES buyer and seller shows that both are equally ambivalent. Examples of the BES buyer's proposals are as follows:

- well I was thinking more in terms of [...] if you're looking to get

- *if you were going to agree on [...] I could most probably push [...]*
- *but F (dollars) er . sixty days (credit) . a nine month . I would make you a firm . er bid*
- *to meet er your competitors' levels you've really got to er . to talk of D (dollars) . on sixty days (credit)*

It is possible that this is a case of pragmalinguistic failure (Thomas, 1983), which occurs "when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2" (ibid, p 99). The SES's realizations of proposals are very similar to requests made in Chinese. For example, it is quite possible to structure a request in the following way without sounding at all demanding:

wo-men xuyao [...] keyi ma

(we) (want) (can) (question tag)

This structure corresponds closely to the SES's realizations where the politeness marker is tagged on later in the form of utterances such as "would that be possible", "would that help" and "is this idea appealable (sic) to you". The concept of pragmalinguistic failure is an extremely useful one in explaining cross-cultural communication, however I would like to suggest that this concept be expanded in the context of new varieties of English. Where Singapore English is concerned for example, the Chinese structures described above are no longer a result of direct transfer from L1 to L2, but are an intrinsic feature of standard Singapore English.

As well as appearing to have threatened the BES's face in terms of power and imposition, the SES also appeared to the BES as being deceptive. I believe the cause for this may lie in the two instances described in terms of interactional structure. The SES may be perceived negatively because of

his apparently deceptive refusal to deal with the BES's implicit requests for feedback in turns 161 and 181. Eventually in turn 204, the BES asks baldly, "so how do you feel about the prices that we've indicated so far". An explanation for this behaviour may be found in what Thomas (1983) terms as sociopragmatic failure, which "stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour" (p 99). From the SES's point of view, it is quite possible that he may not have picked up on the BES's ambivalent structures since he appears not to use them himself. And if he did, it is likely that his apparently 'evasive' reaction is, in his terms, a perfectly legitimate and pragmatically polite way of evading a subject he was not ready to deal with. Anecdotal reports indicate that this is common behaviour used by Chinese-educated businessmen in Singapore who tend to change the subject when they are faced with options that do not appeal to them, and return to the subject with their own proposals at a later point in time.

In looking at the final aspect of language described above - the distribution of talk - it can be seen that the BES speaks most of the time and also takes up most of the lapses. Studies by Bateson (1972) and Mead (1977) quoted in Scollon and Scollon (1983) linking the dimension of spectatorship and exhibitionism to the dimension of submission and dominance suggest that British men in dominant roles are expected to "display" while others watch. However, I do not think this explains the data. Instead I would like to postulate that the BES has been 'forced' by the SES into this behaviour by the latter's use of back-channel devices. Schegloff (1982) suggests that BCDs are often used as 'continuers', functioning to encourage the speaker to continue speaking while allowing the hearer to pass up the opportunity to produce a full turn (p 81). He

also points out that "not all multi-unit turns are the result of speaker initiated methods" but may be "'initiated' by a recipient" when the latter does not take up the turn at possible completion points of a turn.

However, Schegloff also comments that the characterisation of BCDs "appears equivocal" (p 79) as they can also function to express interest, attention and understanding. Coupled with this is the fact that "participants sometimes begin a turn by producing an 'uhm' just after the possible completion of a turn, then pausing, and then producing a turn ..." (p 81). This pragmatic ambivalence in the use of BCDs might account of the lapses that occur after the SES's use of them. The outcome of the SES's frequent use of BCDs probably explains why the BES perceived the SES as being guarded, since the BES would have expected the SES to contribute equally to the talk. On the other hand, the SES might well be perceived, in terms of eastern culture, as showing the BES face by his willingness to listen, since traditionally one shows respect to one's superiors, eg. parents, teachers, by keeping silent while they talk. Once again, in Thomas' (1983) terms, this may be a case of sociopragmatic failure.

Scollon and Scollon (1983) drawing on the work of Brown and Levinson (1978) provide a useful overview of what might have been going on in the negotiation. Their representation (p 169) of an asymmetrical relationship summarises the difficulties the BES encountered in his negotiation with the SES:

The strategies referred to are:

1 bald on record

2 solidarity politeness (= Brown and Levinson's positive politeness, which emphasise the commonality of S and H)

3 deference politeness (= Brown and Levinson's negative politeness, which recognises H's right to be free from imposition)

4 off record

5 imposition not said

In going into the negotiation, the BES probably expected his relationship with the SES to be a symmetrical with low power difference (-P) and high distance (+D). Instead, the BES found himself in a relationship which seemed to him to be one in which there was high power difference (+P) and high distance (+D), with his occupying the lower status.

C) Conclusion

While the qualitative analysis of data can provide interesting insights into language use, there are obvious difficulties concerning the extent to which the features uncovered can be extended to a larger population. This is especially difficult to do with a new variety of English existing in a relatively new society where research into social identity and language is limited. In other words, the question arises as to whether it is possible to generalise the characteristics identified in the data as applying to the majority of Singaporeans. The other difficulty encountered in this research lies in differentiating discourse from negotiation strategies. This becomes important when trying to establish whether the SES's use of bald-on-record proposes are the result of pragmalinguistic failure (a feature of discourse strategies) or a conscious attempt on the SES's part

to intimidate his interlocutor (a feature of negotiation strategies). Answers to these questions can only be recovered with more comprehensive and systematic research.

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